

**Opening Statement of the Honorable John Shimkus**  
**Subcommittee on Environment and the Economy**  
**“Technical Assistance for Rural Water Systems: S. 611, the Grassroots Rural and Small**  
**Community Water Systems Assistance Act”**  
**October 22, 2015**

*(As Prepared for Delivery)*

Today we are reviewing S. 611, the Grassroots Rural and Small Community Water Systems Assistance Act. This bill, which passed the Senate by unanimous consent on June 9, 2015, is the Senate companion to H.R. 2853, introduced by our Ranking Member of the Subcommittee, Mr. Tonko, and the Vice-Chairman of the Subcommittee, Mr. Harper. I congratulate and thank them for their bipartisan work to raise the profile of this issue before the Subcommittee and encouraging our work on it.

According to the Census Bureau, approximately 27 percent of the U.S. population lives in a rural area. The smallest water systems account for 77 percent of all systems. As someone who proudly represents communities in small town and rural America, I am glad we have bipartisan interest in tackling this subject.

Under the Safe Drinking Water Act, small and rural drinking water supply systems are subject to a number of drinking water regulations issued by EPA. These requirements include system monitoring, treatment to remove certain contaminants, and reporting. Addressing these matters requires technical, managerial, and physical capabilities that are difficult to develop and are often beyond the capacity of these towns to afford on the same scale as urban centers – particularly when it comes to regulatory compliance.

It's ironic that these communities, where residents work hard to support their families and their local governments, while often earning wages below those of their counterparts in the more urbanized areas, face per customer compliance costs and demands that are disproportionate to many larger communities. Sometimes, it's just a matter of having the ability to keep up with the red-tape.

Rather than throwing more scarce money at the problem, we learned in February that these communities need help to smartly assessing what their needs are for these systems and prioritize the importance of those needs.

The bill before us amends Safe Drinking Water Act to reauthorize the EPA's program providing technical assistance to small public water systems.

S. 611 maintains the existing statutory authorization of \$15 million annually (including 3 percent for technical assistance to public water systems owned or operated by Indian Tribes), but changes the law to cover funding from fiscal year 2015 through fiscal year 2020. The bill also authorizes EPA to provide technical assistance programs to small public water systems through grants or cooperative agreements made to non-profit organizations. The bill requires preference in awarding grants to non-profits that are most qualified and experienced and that small water systems find most beneficial and effective – a feature we heard about during our February hearing.

Finally, while S. 611 prevents grants and cooperative agreements from being used to bring a citizen suit under SDWA, it expands the types of activities eligible to receive a grant or cooperative agreement under this SDWA to include: assistance with source water protection plans, monitoring plans, and water security.

I want to thank our witnesses who joined us. Having this hearing today is all the more important because, while the House Appropriations Committee has not provided small water system technical assistance funding for fiscal year 2016, that Committee has left open the option that it would re-evaluate funding for this matter as part of a later annual spending bill if Congress enacts a fresh authorization.

People who live in rural communities deserve every bit of water quality and technical resources that folks who live in densely populated urban centers do. We look forward to your wisdom in helping us understand these issues.

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